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Shop Talk at Thirty

By William Purvis

How to spell Kaddafi

Tensions between the United States and Libya's leader are placing new strains on the relationship between Americans and their media while pushing the spirit of the First Amendment to the limit.

Everybody believes in Freedom of the Press, but this thing with the Libyan is close to anarchy.

Kaddafi might be up to something, the nervous follower of public affairs can learn from *Time* or Reuters dispatch.

Kaddafi is talking tough, *Newsweek* reports.

Khadafi lost two planes to U.S. Navy fighters, according to reports from the Associated Press, United Press International and the *Chicago Tribune*.

But Kaddafi has not threatened Americans in Libya, readers learned from the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Nevertheless, Qaddafi is equipped with Russian arms, according to the *New York Times* and all three television networks.

And Qadhafi has been meddling some in Africa, it can be learned from *U.S. News and World Report* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Whatever the cause of this wide disagreement, it clearly is evidence to exonerate the American press from any charge of pack journalism.

This thing splits families.

While *Newsweek* reports on Kaddafi, its sister publication—the *Washington Post*—chronicles the doings of Qaddafi.

It even divides the Free World.

Kadhafi and reports on U.S. reaction to his hit squad have been the subject of dispatches by the French Press Agency.

But Kaddafi is the guy known to readers of the *London Daily Express*, which may subscribe to Reuters, but not it's Gaddafi.

Back in Washington, where they have organizations known as think tanks, not a lot of thought has been given to finding some common ground.

The Heritage Foundation (Qaddafi) sent its subscribers a long backgrounder that notes the CIA's list of spellings calls him Qudhafi, which is one of the more original approaches to the name.

Over at the Brookings Institute, they publish with Qadhafi, but there is disagreement among the staff as to whether that is correct, they say.

Among U.S. government agencies, the State Department's Bureau of Public Affairs favors Qadhafi while the U.S. Information Agency's wireless file deals a lot with Quadhafi, employees say.

Workers at the FBI and on the House Intelligence Committee say they see a lot of Quadaffi.

"I think I've even seen it spelled with a C," said one FBI information man.

Cadaffy Codification could become a new national pastime.

This is a small thing, but it seems to be creating as much unrest among news gatherers as among news consumers.

"We're as much at sea as anyone else," said a worker on one network's Washington news desk. "We have it in the style book but I don't think we always follow it."

"Let me make sure it's not two f's and one d," said the desk of a foreign wire service after quickly offering up a version with two d's and one f.

"I have to look it up every time I use it," said the news editor in another Washington newspaper bureau.

"We fight about it constantly with the desk in London," said a British paper's bureau.

Nothing like this has been seen since the mid-1960s when half the nation's press headlined the war in Viet Nam while the other half editorialized on the dangers of going deeper into Vietnam.

If the first step in solving a problem is identifying the problem, we've got a bigger problem than old what's-his-name.

Right now the reading public is faced with Muammar or Moammar or Mu'Am-mar or Muammer Gadaffi or Khadafy or Qaddafi and minor variations on those themes. The number of possible combinations is a thing for statisticians to ponder with their hand calculators.

Even the White House Press Office doesn't seem ready to show leadership.

"Call back later," one harried White House spokesperson said recently when asked which Libyan they prefer to deal with. "We're right in the middle of a big briefing." The big briefing was on a day—

The White House probably would demur, anyway, on the grounds that leadership here is a thing best left to free enterprise and market forces. Solution may not find this crisis short of a conference call at the summit among the nation's publishers, and maybe not then. Even if such a massive conference call could be arranged, each would have an obvious interest in seeing his or her version settled on as the right one.

Worse, a summit could even yield a spelling that typifies the muddled product of compromise—one that incorporates the outstanding features of all versions; something like Ghuddaffi.

Time—not the magazine, but the passing of weeks, months and years—and only time may offer much-desired relief to readers. The story must grow old and the personalities fade. Maybe by the year 2000 the Libyans will be thoughtful enough to be led by someone who calls himself Smith.

Meanwhile, any private citizens of Libya trying to follow all of this are luckier than the Americans who want to keep up. All they have to worry about is Regan and Reagan, and which one controls the money and which one controls everything else in the U.S. government.

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